

Results from experimental trials testing participant responses to White, Hispanic and Black suspects in high-fidelity deadly force judgment and decision-making simulations

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Abstract

Objective

Advance the methodological techniques used to examine the influence of suspect race and ethnicity on participant decisions to shoot in an experimental setting.

Methods

After developing and testing a novel set of 60 realistic, high definition video deadly force scenarios based on 30 years of official data on officer-involved shootings in the United States, three separate experiments were conducted testing police ($n = 36$), civilian ($n = 72$) and military ($n = 6$) responses ($n = 1,812$) to the scenarios in high-fidelity computerized training simulators. Participants' responses to White,

Support

Black and Hispanic suspects in potentially deadly situations were analyzed using a multi-level mixed methods strategy. Key response variables were reaction time to shoot and shooting errors.

Results

In all three experiments using a more externally valid research method than previous studies, we found that participants took *longer to shoot Black suspects* than White or Hispanic suspects. In addition, where errors were made, participants across experiments were more likely to shoot unarmed White suspects than unarmed Black or Hispanic suspects, and were more likely to *fail to shoot* armed Black suspects than armed White or Hispanic suspects. In sum, this research found that participants displayed significant bias *favoring* Black suspects in their decisions to shoot.

Conclusions

The results of these three experiments challenge the results of less robust experimental designs and shed additional light on the broad issue of the role that status characteristics, such as race and ethnicity, play in the criminal justice system. Future research should explore the generalizability of these findings, determine whether bias favoring Black suspects is a consequence of administrative measures (e.g., education, training, policies, and laws), and identify the cognitive processes that underlie this phenomenon.

Keywords

Police Decision making Suspect race Suspect ethnicity

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